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FOR SEN. CLELAND, A SEARING REVELATION AFTER 31 YEARS

(By E. Michael Myers and Betsy Rothstein)

For 31 years, Sen. Max Cleland (D–Ga.) has labored under the belief that he was to blame for dropping the hand grenade that forever transformed his life.

It was an otherwise insignificant moment in a still-divisive war, a terrible instant when Cleland lost his legs, his right arm and, for the time being, his dignity.

But from the confusion of that moment—the bleeding, the flood of nausea, the blinding pain, the medics scrambling to patch him together—has emerged an unshakable notion: that he was most likely responsible for that act.

That is, until now.

The year was 1968. The war, Vietnam. The place, a valley called Khe Sanh.

The valley, only 14 miles from the demilitarized zone, was as dangerous as it was deceptive.

From the air, Khe Sanh was a bastion of streams, rolling hills, picturesque cliffs, lush vegetation and even a waterfall. On the ground, it was teeming with giant rats, razor-sharp grasses, precipitous grades and rivers with violent rapids.

Some 6,000 American Marines were holed up in Khe Sanh. Hiding in the hills surrounding the valley were North Vietnamese army troops. Nobody knew exactly how many. One estimate said 20,000. Another said twice that number.

The hills were so dangerous that supply convoys could not make it through Route 9, the main road into Khe Sanh. The Marines turned to helicopters for their shipments. But even that became so dangerous that C–130 planes had to swoop from the skies to drop supplies from the cargo bays.

Khe Sanh itself was hardly worth saving. Its strategic importance was so low that, when the Americans did finally capture it, they let it go again.

Instead, Gen. William Westmoreland feared another Dien Bien Phu, the 1954 battle which led to the French retreat from Vietnam. The sight of a brigade of Marines in body bags being hauled from Khe Sanh would have been a tragedy of awesome proportions.

That is why the general ordered Operation Pegasus, a large-scale joint Army-Marines rescue effort. Included in the operation was the Army's 1st Air Cavalry Division, the division of 25-year-old Capt. Max Cleland.

The tall son of a secretary and an automobile salesman from Lithonia, Georgia, had signed up for Reserve Officers' Training Corps at Stetson University, was trained in guerrilla warfare and had always ached to fight in an important battle.

After his first three months as a platoon leader of a signal battalion, he thought, ''It didn't seem like much of a war.''

So he volunteered for a dangerous new assignment that would take him to what he considered the nucleus of the war. He became communications officer with the 2nd Infantry Battalion of the 12th Cavalry with the Cav's 2nd Brigade.

Cleland's boredom quickly subsided. At one point during Operation Pegasus, he spent five days and five nights in a bomb crater 20 feet in diameter. In a letter to an aunt, he wrote, ''If I ever make it back to the Atlanta airport, I'll be happy just to crawl home regardless of what shape I'm in.''

Some of the hills around Khe Sanh were battlefields almost as harrowing as any in U.S. military history. Marines still boast of having survived battles known only as Hill 881 and Hill 861.

But the hill where Cleland's fate was decided—once east of Khe Sanh—would not become known for any great act of valor. Its strategic importance was as a communications relay station.

The 12th Cav's Maj. Maury Cralle, Cleland's commanding officer who was stationed in the rear, recalls that he had trouble communicating consistently with the front lines. A relay was needed.

On April 8, 1968, less than a week before the siege of Khe Sanh was broken and one month before his anticipated departure from Vietnam, Capt. Cleland accompanied his men by helicopter to the hill, arriving within minutes.

He had jumped from helicopters countless times before. Usually, there was nothing to it.

He jumped, and once clear of the spinning helicopter blades, turned, watching the chopper lift into the air. That's when he noticed the hand grenade resting on the ground.

Ordinarily, grenades only detonate when their pins are pulled. Somehow, this grenade's pin had become dislodged. All Cleland saw was the grenade.

''I went toward it,'' Cleland said in an interview with The Hill last week. ''I didn't know it was live. It wasn't a heroic act. I just thought it was mine. I really didn't know where in the hell it came from.''

The explosion threw Cleland backwards. His right hand and most of his right leg were gone, and his left leg was a bloody mass.

''The blast jammed my eyeballs into my skull, temporarily blinding me, pinning my cheeks and jaw muscles to the bones of my face,'' Cleland wrote in his 1980 memoir. ''My ears rang with a deafening reverberation as if I were standing in an echo chamber.''

For days, as he fought for his life, flashbacks of the incident haunted him. ''Why had I pressed my luck? What was I trying to prove?''

For more than three months, he battled his condition in Walter Reed Army Medical Center in an orthopedics ward known as the ''Snake Pit.'' It was there where he also battled his self-pity.

For years, Cleland has been inundated by the ''awkward self-conscious stares of people.''

''I have done that 'mea culpa' thing for a long time,'' he described last week. ''Like, 'You were stupid to volunteer, you were stupid to go [to Vietnam], you were stupid to get blown up, you are stupid, stupid stupid.'''

His resolute spirit allowed Cleland to fight the self-doubts and to eventually serve as administrator of the Department of Veterans' Affairs under President Carter and win election to the Senate in 1996.

But as he rolled that critical event over and over again in his mind, one pervading thought stood still: ''Somehow I had fumbled the ball.''

Last week, Cleland was stunned when he received a phone call from a man named David Lloyd—a 60-mm mortar squad leader in ''Charlie'' Company of the 1st Brigade, 1st Regiment of the 1st Marine Division.

Lloyd told Cleland that the grenade that nearly killed him belonged to another soldier.

Lloyd, now a retired airline worker living in Annapolis, Md., told Cleland that he, too, had been stationed on that hill outside Khe Sanh that fateful day. Lloyd said he had watched as Cleland's helicopter came in for landing and, although he couldn't be sure, he believes he even took a photograph.

Lloyd provided The Hill with that photo, as well as evidence of his service in Charlie Company. Company-level documents could not be located for this article. But Marine Corps archival records confirm that one of his brigade's assignments was to set up a relay station outside Khe Sanh during the first two weeks of April 1968 for the Army's First Air Cavalry Division—Cleland's division.

Earlier this month, Lloyd was watching a program about combat medical corpsman on the History Channel in which the senator detailed his account of his injuries. For the first time, he learned that Cleland blamed himself for his injuries.

Lloyd was stunned. ''He had said he had an accident, that he was always dropping things off his web belt, but that is not what happened,'' Lloyd described in an interview. ''I was there, I know what happened.''

Lloyd saw the explosion from his mortar pit 20 yards away and rushed up to Cleland's torn body.

''He was white as chalk,'' Lloyd said. ''His pants were smoldering. It was devastating. I saw literally thousands of wounds in Vietnam. I never thought he would survive.''

Lloyd cut off Cleland's shredded fatigues. He used a belt and medical wrappings to set a tourniquet around the bleeding stumps of his legs. Moments later, a Navy corpsman arrived on the scene and ordered Lloyd to help another wounded soldier who had numerous shrapnel wounds.

Said Lloyd of the second soldier: ''He was crying, but I didn't think it was from the grenade fragments. He kept saying, 'It was my grenade, my grenade.' He was very upset.''

Last Thursday, in the Senate Dining Room, Cleland and Lloyd met for the first time.

For a moment, the former Army captain's world turned upside down. ''It is amazing, it is mind-boggling to go back to the most traumatic part of your life and have the furniture rearranged,'' Cleland said. ''For 31 years, that has been the only story I really knew.''

Slowly trying to digest the information Lloyd has given him, Cleland said,''I don't know whether this gives me relief or not. I guess it is better that way than if it had been my fault. It frees me up to a certain extent.''

Still, for Cleland there are many unanswered questions.

''I think after you survive something traumatic, you wonder why the hell you are alive, why you were left and somebody else is taken. It is called survivor guilt.

''You wonder if God wants me here, why does He want me here, what is He out for?''

Cleland said he knows he is here only by the grace of God, good friends and people like Lloyd, who helped him when he was dying.

''I feel I am where the good Lord wants me. Otherwise I wouldn't be here, I would be on the Wall. Oh my God. Thirty-one years later, it wasn't my hand grenade at all, it was somebody else's? It's been a hell of a week.''

Mr. BYRD. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I may be permitted to proceed for my full 10 minutes, if necessary.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

SPRINGTIME

Mr. BYRD. Mr. President, there is an old adage—and I have heard it many times, and so have you and our other colleagues—that, ''March comes in like a lion and leaves like a lamb.'' That adage was certainly turned on its ear this year. March tiptoed in on little lamb's hooves, as soft and warm as a curly fleece, giving us all hope of an early, mild spring.

Aha. The smiles that have lighted up the faces here in the pages and the officers of the Senate and the employees of

the Senate who sit before me here when I mentioned that word ''spring.''

In West Virginia, the center of the world—half the world on one side, half the world on the other—West Virginia, early daffodils pushed through great rafts of dried leaves washed up against old stone farmhouse foundations that jut like rocky reefs out of sunny hillsides. Oh, the iridescent sunsets and the viridescent hills that are West Virginia's. Bluebirds decorated telephone line perches while forsythia blossoms announced the awakening of the Earth.

Then the March lion roared with a vengeance, sending successive storm waves across the Nation. Snow buried the daffodils under a crystalline blanket of sparkling white. West Virginia was hit hard by these late storms, as were many other States. What was a boon for skiers and schoolchildren has been a real hardship for commerce and commuters.

But now, as the vernal equinox and the official first day of spring approaches, we can all look forward to the lion at last lying down with the lamb. It is time, as the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909), wrote in ''Atlanta in Calydon'':

For winter's rains and ruins are over,
And all the season of snows and sins;
The days dividing lover and lover,
The light that loses, the night that wins;
And time remembered is grief forgotten,
And frosts are slain and flowers begotten,
And green underwood and cover
Blossom by blossom the spring begins.

Once again, the warm sun encourages us to consider folding away our scarves, our gloves, and our overcoats, retiring the snow shovel to the shed, and pulling out instead the trowel and the seed packets.

How many of us have enjoyed looking at those seed packets and fancying ourselves as young farmers, how we would grow these cucumbers, or these tomatoes, or this lettuce, or these onions, or the potatoes?

What promise is contained in seed packets! What a joy. Reading garden catalogs during cold, dark winter days inspires small-scale gardeners like myself with dreams of grandeur. Ah, fancy myself growing these beautiful vegetables. Ah. I am sure that others have shared that pleasantry with me many times. A few tomato plants are all that I really have the time for, but for me those humble plants with the spicy scent, their soft leaves and glossy fruits—Better Boy, Big Boy, Beefsteak, Early Girl—a few tomato plants are all that I really have the time for, but for me, those humble plants with their spicy scent, their soft leaves and glossy fruits, serve each year to reconnect me with cycles of nature. In my few tomato plants, I share with farmers throughout the Nation worries about cold spells, early frosts, drought, excessive rainfall, fungus, and insect infestation. But, like those farmers throughout the Nation, I glory in the success of my efforts, and my family and neighbors—mostly my family—share in the bounties of those tomato plants.

How can one even dare to believe that there is no God, no Creator? Why do I put those tomato plants in the ground? Why? I have confidence that the Creator of man and the universe is going to make those tomato plants bear some fruit.

And this year I will delight in introducing the newest member of my family, too—I say to our distinguished leader, a new member of my family—a dainty great-granddaughter, Caroline Byrd Fatemi; wait until I introduce her to my garden. She was born just 2 weeks ago yesterday. So small and precious now, she will grow strong and happy in the sunshine. And perhaps someday she too will grow some tomatoes.

I do love the promise of the spring.

William Jennings Bryan spoke of the Father, the Creator:

If the Father deigns to touch with divine power the cold and pulseless heart of the buried acorn and to make it burst forth from its prison walls, will He leave neglected in the Earth the soul of man made in the image of his Creator?

If He stoops to give to the rosebush whose withered blossoms float upon the autumn breeze, the sweet assurance of another springtime, will He refuse the words of hope to the sons of men when the frosts of winter come?

I do love the promise of the spring. Every place is better for springtime's artistry. There exists no imposing monument of granite or marble that is not improved by a softening verdigris of springtime green, highlighted by bright blooms. Washington is at its best in April and May, under bright skies and tossing cherry blossoms, with all of its governmental mass leavened by leaves. Spring travels a little slower to the hillsides of West Virginia, but it is, perhaps, all the more cherished for blooming later. There, in the deep shadows of the hills where rhododendron thickets outline quiet chapels among the cathedral of the trees, greening springtime coincides in harmony with God's Easter promise of resurrection.

I encourage my colleagues, and everyone else, too, to shake off the last of the winter blahs and go outside. Go early in the morning when the birds sing in grand chorus, or in the blinding brightness of noon, or in the lilac serenity of evening, but go outside. Go outside and breathe in the scent of hyacinths and fresh-turned earth. Plant a garden. Plant a single tomato seedling and join in the great community of gardeners and farmers and lovers of the earth. But do enjoy the springtime. It resurrects the spirit.

I asked the Robin as he sprang
From branch to branch and sweetly sang
What made his breast so round and red
''Twas looking at the sun,'' he said.

And I asked the violets sweet and blue,
Sparkling in the morning dew,
Whence came their colors, then so shy,
They answered, ''Looking to the sky.''

I saw the roses one by one
Unfold their petals to the sun.
I asked them what made their tints so bright,
And they answered, ''Looking toward the light.''

I asked the thrush whose silvery note
Came like a song from angel's throat,
Why he sang in the twilight dim.
He answered, ''Looking up at Him.''

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

Mr. CLELAND addressed the Chair.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Georgia.

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, will the Senator from Georgia allow me a brief action before he makes his statement, dealing with the schedule?

Mr. CLELAND. Mr. President, I gladly yield.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Mississippi, the majority leader, is recognized.

CONGRATULATIONS TO SENATOR BYRD ON THE BIRTH OF HIS GREAT GRANDDAUGHTER

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, I want to express my happiness and congratulations to the distinguished Senator from West Virginia on the birth of his great granddaughter. One of the most memorable experiences I had in my life in the Senate was his beautiful and eloquent statement on the floor in recognition of June 20, 1998, the date of the birth of that fine young American, my grandson, Chester Trent Lott, III. So I know how much it means to Senator BYRD as his family continues to grow and expand, and what a lovely gift it is to have that great grandchild. I thank Senator BYRD for making us all aware of this. I am sorry my eloquence could never rise to the level of his on the birth of my grandson. But I will continue to work on that, I should say to Senator BYRD.

THE SMILING MAJORITY LEADER

Mr. BYRD. Mr. President, if the Senator will yield, I don't know about eloquence, but I can say that the Senator from Mississippi always carries a warm smile. I have not been noted for smiling. I once read a story by Nathaniel Hawthorne entitled, ''The Great Stone Face.'' And so I usually think of myself, in the context of that story, as the great stone face. But the distinguished Senator from Mississippi is always bubbling with energy, always on the move, always wearing a smile, always with twinkling eyes. He brings a lift to the spirits of all of us. I congratulate him. I know that grandchild of his is always going to carry the picture in his little mind of that grandfather with that sparkling, radiant smile.

Mr. LOTT. I thank the Senator.

CONSULTATION WITH CONGRESS ON KOSOVO

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, Senator BYRD and I, as a matter of fact, just came from an extended meeting with the President of the United States, where the joy of our grandchildren and great grandchildren was also uppermost in our minds, because we are